

**LCDP LEADERSHIP SEMINAR  
THE POWER OF STORYTELLING  
April 4, 2017**

**Roll Call:**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Present</b>
Amanda Goeller	X
Andy Bailey	X
Aria Remondi	X
Chris Kerns	X
Catherine Marzin	X
Cecelia Linder	X
Chris Landsea	X
Chris O'Connors	X
Dan Simon	X
Demian Schane	X
Elaine Saiz	
Erica Rule	X
Erika Brown	X
Forbes Darby	X
Hernan Garcia	X
Ian Zelo	X
Ian Sears	
Jasmin John	X
Jennifer Stark	
Jessica Kondel	X
Jessica Snowden	X
Jessica White	X
Kevin Fryar	
Kim Jenkins	X
Marian Westley	
Nikola Garber	X
Natalia Donoho	
Paula Fratantoni	
Sunny Snider	X
Terence Lynch	X

**Summary:** Tracy Levstik convened the group, took roll call and gave the floor to Timi. Timi shared her interest in the subject of storytelling – that is, her natural fascination as an anthropologist and archaeologist. She described the title slide, which shows depictions of

stories conveyed by humans across time and on all continents except Antarctica<sup>1</sup>. Her key point is that humans have been telling stories since they came down from the trees and found fire, and stories are as important today as they were in ancient times. Timi “read” a story about her work to make a film about women of the NOAA Commissioned Officer Corps (**TAB A**), and showed a segment of the film in response to the question: *“Why do you think it is important to tell stories of women of the NOAA Corps?”*

The group shared post-video thoughts on why they thought it was important for NOAA to tell stories. Some of the feedback included how important it is for constituents to (help us) tell our story; that storytelling is a great way to make us relatable, shows trust, and helps us share how our work impacts and benefits people. We need to tell our story so people know about us. The group also discussed some of the challenges of storytelling within NOAA. This includes relatively little investment in communicating what we do (e.g., relative to NASA), the need for clarity and plain language so our messages resonate with multiple audiences, and the way we do things currently can be so dull and dry (e.g. many press releases)!

The three assigned readings were chosen to spur thinking on some of the different dimensions of storytelling.

1. **Reading 1:** Brent Dykes describes data storytelling as an essential data science skill. “Numbers have an important story to tell. They rely on you to give them a clear and convincing voice.” In this article we are reminded that we all have particular beliefs, assumptions and suspicions. There is a difference between reporting and storytelling and given our biases, Timi asked what data storytelling might mean for a public and data rich science agency like NOAA? Timi felt this question hinted at potential angst (or fear) around drawing conclusions with our data, particularly in a highly-politicized environment in which certain words and phrases are “off limits” (e.g., coastal zone management, climate change, etc).
2. **Reading 2:** Lise Saffran notes that the meaning of any given set of facts is subject to interpretation. “...while the data may have been generated in your lab, the task of science communication is to convey the significance of those data to the people outside of your lab – an audience that may and often does have an entirely different frame for interpreting the

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<sup>1</sup> Asia: UNESCO World Heritage Site: Petroglyphs within the Archaeological Landscape of Tamgaly in modern Kazakhstan. Carvings in this complex date from 1500 BCE. Reference: [http://whc.unesco.org/?cid=31&l=en&id\\_site=1145](http://whc.unesco.org/?cid=31&l=en&id_site=1145)

Africa: The north wall of Tutankhamun’s burial chamber tells the story of the king’s transition from this world to the realm of the gods. Age of imagery: 1324 BCE. Image Reference: <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/05/160509-king-tut-tomb-chambers-radar-archaeology/>

Europe: UNESCO World Heritage Site: Rock Carvings in Tanum Sweden reveal the life and beliefs of people in Europe during the Nordic Bronze Age, 1700-500 BCE. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/557>

South America: UNESCO World Heritage Site: Cueva de las Manos, Rio Pinturas, Argentina. Artwork within the cave was executed between 11,000 to 7,500 BCE. Site Reference: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/936>

North America: Newspaper Rock State Historic Monument (Utah). Petroglyphs at the site are dated to 17-1367 CE, created by ancestral Puebloan people. In Navajo, the rock is called “Tse’ Hone” which translates to a rock that tells a story. Reference: <https://www.nps.gov/pefo/learn/historyculture/newspaper-rock.htm>

Australia: Aboriginal pictographs of creation beings (Wandjina style) from the Kimberley region of north-western Australia. New radiocarbon dating techniques date this work to a minimum age of 7,402 BCE. Reference: <http://www.archaeology.wiki/blog/2016/12/08/new-techniques-make-possible-date-australian-aboriginal-rock-art/>

material you present.” Timi noted that this article had a strong focus on the audience and she asked the group to think about How might we reach audiences with differing beliefs, assumptions and suspicions? Timi thought that this question touched on our current era of “Alternative Facts” in which trust in experts is declining and authenticity and personal connection matter more. Authenticity and connection are derived from understanding that the storytellers own values, perceptions and culture are powerful influences on the story being told just as they are influencing how the audience is hearing the story. She thought it was interesting to think about telling stories about science and people and events as an exercise in cross-cultural communication.

3. **Reading 3:** This reading focused on the imperative of telling the truth. In this article Guber dispelled the misconception that storytelling is in conflict with authenticity. Great storytelling does not conflict with truth. It is always built on the integrity of the story and its teller. He describes the four truths of the storyteller:

- Truth to the Teller: Authenticity is a crucial quality of the storyteller. When you tell a story, it has to be who you are.
- Truth to the Audience: Respecting the audiences’ time by taking the time to understand what listeners know and care about (emotionally in touch); sharing the story and inviting listeners in – to join the journey.
- Truth to the Moment: Context matters. The context of the telling is always a part of the story.
- Truth to the Mission: A great storyteller is devoted to a cause beyond self. When truth to the mission conflicts with truth to the audience, truth to the mission should win out. The leader who knows his listeners is able to gain their trust and spend that currency wisely in pursuit of the mission. But this doesn’t mean telling people exactly what they want to hear.

The question posed to the group for this reading: *“How do you see these truths reflected in the stories NOAA tells?”*

Time for dialog was tight, but the group offered some excellent thoughts on these readings and questions. There was discussion around the audience and who we tell our stories to? Audience matters, and we don’t always think deeply about that. Discussion also focused on the practical elements of storytelling – that is, getting facts straight and being consistent. Again, these are things we strive for within the agency.

The group also discussed the implications of our skills (or lack thereof) in storytelling and how this can be seen in our budget. If we can’t tell a compelling story (accurately and consistently), then we can’t expect to see much funding. One classmate offered a good comment and example of a situation within NOAA in which a paper was politicized, and how sometimes

NOAA shies away from things that are controversial because controversy can (and often does) negatively impact funding.

The related issues of connecting with audience, and also a recognition that storytelling isn't a skill that comes naturally to many people was discussed and it was generally recognized that within our agency we don't have a lot of investment in this kind of skill development. A couple classmates shared examples of the struggle around telling stories, either from personal experience or during a detail assignment. It can be a struggle to get that "elevator speech!". There was good dialog around the tension between making our data accessible and making our data understandable, and the reality of many within the agency who are focused on data quality and validation, and not on what these data may mean. For many, there isn't a lot of opportunity to tell a story, and this can be a risk to the agency – as those data are then interpreted and told by others to meet external ends.

Classmates also shared good examples of how you don't always need a "big story" – especially when the information you're trying to convey is urgent. Thinking about how to communicate a hazard, for example – putting data in terms or in a context that the general public will understand and respond to is equally important.

A couple classmates shared their feelings about storytelling in our modern age. One spoke about how sad it can be to see our stories through platforms, such as Facebook. Often it seems the only way to engage is via a comment box, and that can often feel negative. This was an excellent observation, and although the assigned reading did not touch upon the subject of technology, our use of it certainly has really changed how we communicate our stories. It was hoped that this would be something the class could dedicate some thought and discussion to during our upcoming time at the FEI. Another classmate shared frustrations around how we seemingly have to keep telling the same sort of stories over and over again. NOAA has been around for a long time and the things that we care about (and are responsible for in terms of mission) are still issues and are sometimes put into question - and that can be frustrating! This classmate made a good observation in noting that we can't have 1 cookie cutter way of communicating. Our communications have to be targeted to specific audiences. Both of these comments touched upon a number of key messages in the Peter Guber article.

---END/T. Vann